DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 073 715 FL 003 811

AUTHOR Wivell, Charles J.
TITLE Problems of Teaching Chinese Literature in a Comparative Literature Program.
PUB DATE 25 Nov 72
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at a meeting of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 25, 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; College Language Programs; Cultural Education; *Language Instruction; Literary Analysis; *Literature; Modern Languages; Short Stories; *Teaching Methods; *Translation

ABSTRACT

Sinologists concerned with methods of teaching literature are exposed to an interpretive and structural approach to the field. Problems encountered in translating the Chinese short story into English are illustrated by several examples. A method of analysis of the thematic structure of a story is examined on three levels: (1) overt plot and theme structure, (2) patte1 s of literary allusions integral to the plot, and (3) less obvious patterns of verbal imagery and action related to the specific theme of a particular story. (RL)

Charles J. Wivell

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Problems of Teaching Chinese Literature In a Comparative Literature Program

ED 073715

The topic "teaching literature" poses some problems which are of great importance to teachers and to their students. There is no ambiguity in any one's mind if we speak of "teaching Chinese" or "teaching mathmatics". We know that what is implied is a fairly direct relationship between the teacher, a body of knowledge to be explicated by him in terms of agreed upon patterns of linguistic analysis or mathmatical formulation, and his students. The students learn the materials which have been structured by their teacher in some easily digested and progressive fashion.

The abstraction "literature" differs from "language" and "mathmatics" in important ways. If literature is works of poetry, fiction, drama, and other verbal structures which people r fer to as examples, then it is not possible to "teach" literature. Literature is read by individuals. What teachers do is to encourage students to read as widely and in as organized a fashion as possible. The teacher offers methods of approach, yet his methods are not likely to be as objectively centered as those used by the language teacher or the mathmatician.

Depending upon the level and background of the students, some approaches are clearly more relevant than others. My students at the University of Rochester, for example, are interested in Chinese Literature in Translation as a means of broadening their knowledge of World Literature, or they are interested in the subject as an adjunct to their studies in Chinese History. Frequently, my students have a good knowledge of English and American Literature, and occasionally they have some background in cognate Western literary traditions. All have at least some familiarity with the Judeo-Christian bible, and recently

FL 003 811

a growing number have had some exposure to aspects of East Asian cultures. The last mentioned group includes some who approach all examples of non-Western culture, and particularly those of China and Japan in a paradoxical fashion: from time to time these students rationalize their lack of application to their studies with statements about the impossibility of Westerners understanding such a unique and exotic tradition as the Chinese. The problem is to determine how one may make it possible for one's students to utilize all they have learned to approach Chinese literature, and to point out to those students who prefer to use exoticism as an excuse for lack of application that the ultimate direction of that tendency is toward dehumanization of the object of study, and finally toward a denial of the possibility of learning anything which is different from what we already know.

I should stress the fact that pointing out similarities and parallels between Western and Chinese Literature does not imply any insistence upon identity or necessary influences. It does imply that similar methods of analysis will very often be equally fruitful tools in understanding Western and Chinese Literature.

The kinds of literary critical methods I find to be most helpful to my students are those which are interpretive and structural. It is relevant to my students whether the author of a particular novel was someone who lived in 1700 or 1800, and whether the work is a joint production or two or more authors, or presents a particular version of a tradition, but they do not need to read complex textual-historical studies. The materials the students must use to approach the tradition are translations and a few incisive articles in specialist journals.

Both the sinologist who writes articles for learned journals and the translator have an audience in mind when they write or translate, different from the audience which enrolls in our classes. The sinologist writes for his scholarly peers, and his works are characteristically research oriented and freighted with the necessarily heavy documentation and esoteric scholarly apparatus suitable to his audience of insiders. The translator is under pressure from the popular market and his editors who wish to sell books to produce interesting and readable translations which will appeal to the browser and the curious. The problems presented to the student of Chinese Literature in Translation are closely tied to the limitations of translation and translators. Simple inaccuracies are not insuperable obstacles; as long as the inaccuracies and ommissions do not critically affect the overall content of a short story or novel, it is still possible for the student to attempt to analyse motifs, themes, plot lines, and to a large extent characterization. Structural features will be apparent in most translations, as for example in the Ming short vernacular works, even if all of the prelude stories are not translated, and if much of the verse is left out. It is when analysis attempts to reach beyond overt features, to discuss questions of style, thematic characterization, or thematic structure involving the operation of motifs and verbal signals throughout an entire novel or poem that we begin to reach the ultimate limits of the translators' art.

First let me discuss what my students attempt to do with analysis of more overt features in fiction, and finally I will discuss attempts we have made at more complicated kinds of literary analysis.

In comparing overt similarities between his own tradition and the Chinese tradition the extent of knowledge the student possesses concerning the Western tradition is extremely important. He shoul be familiar with at least some of the great and persevering themes of World Literature: the

quest story, visits to paradise or to the netherworld, hero stories, love stories, ghost stories, detective stories, major folktale motifs, etc. One can not assume this knowledge on the part of one's students.

The presentation of translated material and supplementary readings in Chinese and non-Chinese cultural traditions is topical. If the student is to begin examining Chinese literary works from the point of view of parallel structures in literature and early examples of displaced myth and ritual patterns, for example, he must first be introduced to similar kinds of studies concerned with non-Chinese literary traditions. My students read Thespis by Theodore Gaster for a scholarly and theoretical orientation, and in conjunction with this they read selections from Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism[1], and Otto Rank's Myth of the Birth of the Hero. Next, they read selections from Bredon and Metropanow's The Moon Year, and from Fitzgerald's Cultural History of China. The students' next readings are summaries of legends concerning the overthrow of the Hsia Dynasty by the Shang Dynasty, and King Wu's Campaign Against King Chou[2], selected excerpts from Water Margin (Jackson's translation of the Shui Hu Chuan), Changes in Li Family Village by Chao Shu-li, and the opera The Whitehaired Girl.

The next topic in the course is the journey motif, and we begin with readings from Eliade's Shamanism. Next come readings from Songs of the South, David Hawkes' translations from the Ch'u Tz'u, and Arthur Waley's commentaries on the Nine Songs. We are then in a position to read variations on the theme of the shamanistic trip: "The Shang Lin Park" by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, translated by Burton Watson in Anthology of Chinese Literature, "Mu-lien Rescues His Mother From Hell", in Arthur Waley's Ballads and Stories From Tunhuang, and Chien Nü Li Hun Chi (Chien Nü's Soul Wanders), in both the T'ang prose version and the Yüan dramatic version (my own translations), or to see how the pattern appears as a detached motif in more heterogeneous structures.

Thirdly, with increasing information and practice the student is prepared to begin examining more complex structures in the Chinese fiction tradition, problems of thematic structure. We begin with a close reading of an Early Ming Dynasty literary tale by LI Chen titled "Return of the Soul of CHIA Yün-hua" (my translation). The tale represents one of the best early examples of closely written thematic narrative I know. In terms of plot structure the tale belongs to a large group of stories which includes the previously mentioned Chien Nü's Soul Wanders. A young couple are betrothed in early childhood, and sometime later the girl's parents or parent, usually the mother, repudiates the agreement. A happy outcome for the story is made possible by use of a deus ex machina such as the Buddhist re-incarnation motif, the Shamanistic-Taoistic motif of the wandering soul, or a more simple motif of revival from death. In any case there is a happy ending, the opposition of the older generation is overcome, and a new social microcosm is established by the joyful couple. In overt terms, there is a point of convergence here between the presentation of the comic theme on the macro-social level, as illustrated in stories such as King Wu's Campaign Against King Chou, Changes in Li Family Village, and White Haired Girl, wherein the entire society is given a new life and all or as many as possible of the groups within the old society are integrated into the new, and the presentation of the same theme on a micro-cosmic level: foundation of a new social unit.

More specific analysis of the thematic structure of this particular story is possible. There are at least three levels of structure to the narrative: (1) Overt plot and theme structure, (2) Patterns of literary allusions integral to the plot, (3) Less obvious patterns of verbal imagery and action related to the specific theme of this particular story. Given a fairly decent translation students find no problem in comprehending the organization on Level (1), and with sufficient information about the literary allusions placed throughout the story, organization at Level (2) is likewise

for example, at the beginning of the story allusions to betrothal agreements which were honored in spite of difficulty occur, as do allusions to successful rebellions by lovers against parental authority such as Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and Cho Wen-chün. As the story moves into a description of the conflict between the betrothed couple and the girl's mother, allusions to the Hsi-hsiang Chi become frequent, to the extent that the earlier story becomes a determining structural element in this prose narrative. More than one scene from the drama is almost paraphrased in the story, and presented in such a way as to increase suspense or raise the expectations of the reader. At the same time, the author continues to develop his patterns of less structurally dominant allusions: increasingly, the sad fates of unsuccessful lovers are alluded to in the narrative, until the conflict section of the story ends with the girl's death, to be followed by her re-incarnation and happy marriage with her original betrothed.

Level (3) is most easily dealt with in translation through careful attention to details of characterization. How do the characters define themselves by what they say and do? What contrasts are apparent between the major characters? Finally, how do the various motifs combine throughout the story to present a theme peculiar to this particular work?

After finishing this exercise my students read the two novels Monkey and Dream of the Red Chamber.

Though much is excised from the Chinese novel in Arthur Waley's Monkey it is nevertheless possible to follow the most important features of plot and characterization, and enough of the significant motif patterns are preserved in his English version to enable the student to begin to analyse the narrative in terms of thematic structure. Whatever the student knows concerning journey stories, quests, hero stories, Western Medievil Romances and hagiography, Buddhism, folklore, to mention only a few areas, will be helpful to him in approaching this very interesting and heterogeneous Chinese

novel.

The same is true of the novel Dream of the Red Chamber, and thanks to the fact that our students have two English versions to examine, they can really do much more interesting analysis than would otherwise be possible. Given a close explication of the two translations in conjunction with a literal reading of selected portions from the Chinese, the student can at least begin to distinguish between stylistic devices of the translator, such as the very frequent addition of qualifying adjective phrases in Kuhn's translation, which can affect characterization seriously, and recurrent patterns of imagery which are successfully carried across by both translators and which function to delineate character.

Problems of this type can not be solved for the English reader, but careful critiques and annotations supplied in dittograph form provide at least some help to students as they read. Perhaps, someday we will have useful supplementary annotations published in conjunction with some of the better translations of important works of the Chinese fiction tradition; materials prepared with the particular needs and goals of our audience of students.

FOOT NOTES

[1]The definition of "comedy"used in this paper is that of Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism.

[2]A convenient translation of this is by LIU Ts'un-yen in Buddhist and Taoist Influences on the Chinese Novel.